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PROBLEMS OF FIRST-YEAR LATIN^{*}

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I feel that I owe an apology to this distinguished gathering of scholars and experienced teachers for having the presumption, as an outsider, a teacher not of Latin but of modern languages, to address you on the problems connected with the teaching of first-year Latin. I am indebted for this honor to my good friends, the Latin teachers of the Cleveland public schools, and I sincerely hope that I shall not disappoint the kind confidence and hopes they placed in me.

I came to Cleveland in 1918 to organize the teaching of French. A week after my arrival I was asked to undertake also the supervision of Spanish and a month later, someone in authority noticed that Latin stood all alone without adviser and defender in the headquarters staff, and I was asked to adopt the orphan. Latin could easily have found a more competent adviser but hardly a warmer friend and a stauncher champion.

My experience with Latin, as I have just said, has not been that of a teacher. When I attempted to elaborate a policy, a platform upon which we could base a rational Latin course of study, I resorted to these sources of information: first, my own experience as a Latin student. When I take a retrospective look upon my nine years of study in the various Latin classes, I have an unshakable conviction that owing to wrong methods I wasted two to three years of that time; in other words, had the teaching been more efficient, more according to sound pedagogical practice, I could have accomplished as much in one-third less time. Second, the fact that Latin is a language led me to the conviction that the study and teaching of it must have problems in common with the study and teaching of

^{*} Read at the Cleveland meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South.

other languages. My experience therefore as a modern-language teacher and a student of methods ought to be of value if applied to any other language. Third, my personal observations in Latin classes were of help to me; the high rate of mortality among Latin students, the small number surviving Caesar and willing to undertake Cicero. Fourth, my many conversations with Latin teachers quickly convinced me that they also felt dissatisfaction with the results and a longing for greater efficiency of method. As soon as I had worked out a definite set of principles that I thought should apply to the teaching of Latin, I called together a meeting of representative Latin teachers, and, after going over the whole course of study, we came to the conclusion that reforms were in order, and, as everything depends upon a study of the fundamentals of the language, we decided to make at first a thorough study of the problems of first-year Latin. I shall attempt, within the brief limit of time allotted me, to outline the cardinal principles upon which we are trying to build our new course of study.

May I say right at this point that I am not in favor of the direct method in the teaching of languages, as commonly understood, as represented by books published by the Oxford University Press and as demonstrated sometimes in universities. My objections to the usual direct method are that it is not systematic enough in the teaching of grammatical principles, that it sacrifices everything to the reading-text, that it frequently introduces in the reading several grammatical points which have not yet been taught and which the student is not asked to account for. Students are thus encouraged to accept things without reasoning them, and acquire the very injurious habit of slovenliness. I believe, however, in a certain type of direct method, as I shall explain further.

Before announcing a platform, it would not be amiss to state the aims that we are striving to achieve in the teaching of Latin.

The first of all aims, the one that must be the constant obsession of every teacher, is mental discipline or culture. I know that it is not fashionable any more to speak of that one aim. Exponents of modern psychology tell us that there is no such thing as mental discipline; that the only disciplinary value found in any study is a greater ability to do another correlated thing. I beg strongly

to dissent. I have an inner conviction that the teaching of Latin achieves more than that. That conviction is the resultant of my personal experience as a student, of retrospective views upon my own studies, and of an analysis of their various contributions to my mental equipment. I owe a debt to Latin that I am trying today in my own small way to repay by contributing what I can to the improvement and to the popularizing of that magnificent instrument of culture.

Our second aim is to my judgment the ability to read Latin. I should like to emphasize here what I understand by reading. It is a process by which the meaning of the sentences read flashes instantaneously to the mind of the reader without passing through the clumsy intermediary of the mother-tongue. Any reading that is not reasonably spontaneous is not reading but *deciphering*. Let us not stop at deciphering. In my discussion of methods I shall attempt to show how we can impart to students that ability to *enjoy* reading Latin that will make them give up the habit of "riding" into Caesar and Cicero.

I shall only mention the other two aims, acquaintance with Roman culture and civilization, and improvement of the student's English, as we are all in substantial agreement on those points.

The first-year Latin course which is now in process of elaboration is based upon the following fundamental principles:

1. We shall attempt to teach only one difficulty at a time. This point seems to be a very obvious one, but is so universally violated in all textbooks that it is very important to state it. The younger the child, the smaller should be the unit presented; one case at a time is entirely sufficient and is as much as an American student unused to complexity can grasp well. The introduction of larger units or of several various units of difficulty at one teaching creates a confusion in the minds of Freshmen that it takes valuable time later on to untangle.

2. Each fundamental fact of language should be presented in the normal way in which it functions in the language. Let us take for an illustration the declension and the conjugation. The old-fashioned way of memorizing a tense person after person and a declension case after case in a parrot-like fashion is pedagogically

wrong because it creates wrong associations of ideas and does not correspond to the way a verb or a noun ever occurs in a sentence. You have all watched the somewhat pathetic demeanor of the student who in order to find the third person singular present indicative of *amo*, has to go first through the tense.

3. Students should be detained long enough on each point of grammar to achieve a reasonable mastery of it before proceeding to the next point. Confusion is invariably created by proceeding rapidly from one point to another. We wish to abolish the mad steeplechase through the Latin grammar that characterizes what is commonly called first-year Latin. Latin grammar is far too complex to be mastered even in its elementary principles in one year. Oh! we may fool ourselves by saying: "I finished the assignment; my students are ready to read Caesar." We know fully well that they are not. We know from sad experience that the rules they have so hurriedly studied constitute a hopeless jumble of facts, undigested and unassimilated; we know that their vocabulary is too limited for real reading; we know also that there are just as many "ponies" sold as copies of Caesar in every bookstore in town. Who in his infinite wisdom decided that there must be just one year devoted to Latin study before Caesar is begun? Colleges are disclaiming responsibility on this point. When accused they reply and justly so that their entrance requirements are so modest that high schools should have no trouble in covering them. At the bottom of the problem we find only tradition, holy tradition that shackles every Latin teacher to an impossible task and has been a blight on the teaching of Latin for all these years. Furthermore, where is the cultural value of such a course? Culture means precision and thoroughness, not confusion and slovenliness. In my own judgment, the reading of Caesar should not be undertaken until after a thorough study of the fundamental principles of Latin grammar extending over not less than three terms, a year and one-half. The time apparently lost will be largely made up by the greater ease with which reading can be conducted in the third term.

4. While I wish to retain any form of drill that has proved satisfactory in the past, I firmly believe in oral drill not as an end but as a means, not with a view to enable students to achieve

fluency in speaking Latin, but as the best device yet found to maintain interest, to cater to that "love of doing" which is innate in every youth, to make the student visualize, to change for him the abstract into the concrete. In no other way can mastery of grammar and vocabulary be achieved so effectively and so interestingly. My experience with oral drill has so impressed me that I do not hesitate to formulate the following axiom: The shortest road to a reading knowledge of a language is through speaking.

The type of oral drill that I recommend, however, does not mean the adoption of the so-called conversational method; it is not a hit-and-miss series of questions and answers which make demand only upon the memory. The oral drill that I consider of value is a kind of oral composition. It involves a system of reasoning of forms that brings into play in an intensive way the ability to think quickly, to discriminate, to compare. A student who can apply a certain rule and use a certain vocabulary orally knows that vocabulary and has a mastery of that rule.

Every investigation made in the mental processes involved in learning a language has shown that the eye is a very poor organ for language study. A word that has been only seen by the eye has made but a fleeting impression upon the brain; while a word that the lips have uttered and the ears have heard has cut a deep groove upon the memory. If you wish to test the truth of this, ask any Latin student how many times he has looked up the same word in his lexicon!

5. Oral drill, however, desirable as it is, is very difficult, in fact practically impossible with the type of text that is offered in first-year Latin books. I am not unmindful of the fact that the vocabulary should be composed mostly of words to be found later in Caesar. But certainly Caesar cannot be held responsible for the type of sentences found in the average first-year books—such gems as: "The daughter of the queen is congratulating the sailor in the farmer's garden," "The boy has been warned," "The animals have been seen in the forest," "Some Romans were soldiers, others were orators," "We all know the boys desire victory," etc.

Not the least objection to sentences of that kind is their stupidity. They give the student the unfortunate impression that

Latin is a silly language that is not used as a vehicle for thought but only for grammatical facts. We accustom him to look upon all the Latin sentences with which he comes in contact during his first year as being devoid of any meaning and as serving only as illustrations for grammar rules. After having wilfully created in him this impression, after having put him in contact only with disconnected sentences, we plunge him into the most connected, the most complex kind of text, Caesar, and then we wonder that he flounders and that so few students escape drowning!

If we are going to achieve the second of our aims, the ability to read, we must have first-year books that contain texts which, while illustrating skilfully points of grammar, constitute a connected story, a story with a meaning. This is an absolute necessity; first, to train the student to consider Latin as a vehicle for thoughts; second, to enable him to read connected text; third, to give the teacher an opportunity for the oral drill that is so necessary to a mastery of forms and vocabulary; fourth, to stimulate the interest of the student in Latin. The most important lesson that modern pedagogy has revealed to us is the necessity of interesting, if we wish to succeed in our teaching. Forcible feeding is a nasty and seldom successful operation in medical as well as in pedagogical practice. The art of the skilful teacher consists in leading the student to open willingly, eagerly, his mouth rather than in forcibly prying his jaws loose.

6. I believe also that we should teach Latin and not only *about* Latin. Grammar ought not to be taught merely as a collection of abstract principles, without showing any relationship between such principles and the written or spoken language. We should motivate every rule; we should skilfully lead the student to the psychological moment when he needs the rule in order to be able to understand or to express a certain idea. Grammar should live with the language itself.

7. How about the use of the Latin language in the classroom? I have an open mind on this point, and I have not enough data to come to a conclusion. To me the problem resolves itself to this: If the teacher can make himself understood in Latin, if he can convey grammatical rules in that language all the time or part of

the time, it would be very narrow traditionalism to refuse to that teacher the right of making such an efficient use of the time at his disposal. The Latin grammatical nomenclature is not so large, nor so complex that an enthusiastic teacher might not use it instead of the English. The principal advantage in using Latin as much as possible in the conduct of the class is obvious: it maintains the atmosphere of the class; it enlarges the vocabulary; it stimulates the students to greater efforts in Latin by encouraging them to use that language as much as possible. To use English is to follow the line of least resistance. I should like to see experiments conducted by skilful, well-trained teachers in order to furnish us with data on how far it is possible to use the Latin language in the conduct of a Latin class.

Our new course of study is still in the making; we are striving to incorporate into it the various principles that I have enunciated. How far we shall succeed, the future only will tell. I may say, however, that results so far obtained lead us to great hopes. We trust that the time is not far distant when our students will actually read Caesar and Cicero, not decipher them; when they will discuss parts of these authors in *Latin* instead of merely placing one English word under a Latin word and attempting to puzzle out the meaning of that composite.

Whatever success we shall achieve will be due entirely to the earnestness, enthusiasm, initiative, and loyal co-operation of all the Latin teachers in the Cleveland schools. They are intensely interested in the problem and spare no efforts in furthering the experiment. Our fondest hope is that Latin will continue in the prominent place it has in the curriculum of the Cleveland schools and that, by making its teaching more effective and more result-producing, we shall make its far-reaching influence felt by more of our future citizens, our future leaders.